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AN INSIDER/OUTSIDER APPROACH TO LIBRARIES, CHANGE, AND MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS

ABSTRACT

This keynote address focuses on the role that an insider/outsider approach to information has on the role that libraries play in the daily lives of marginalized peoples. Grounded in this discussion is the effect that change has on the information environments of libraries and consequently on the people they wish to serve. As developed in this paper change is a concept whose intent is to bring about an enhanced worldview. Moreover, its central attribute provides for reasonable people to reverse previously held opinions about social reality. However, in this process, change also requires members of a marginalized world to replace what was a comfortable and often information rich world with a completely different set of information needs and uses.
Introduction

I would like to begin my presentation by placing my topic: An Insider/Outsider Approach to Libraries, Change, and Marginalized Populations within the context of our conference theme. First a word about the term, marginalized and its bearing on my topic. Briefly, a marginal person is someone that lives in two small worlds of culture, which are very different from each other. Problems can arise when marginalized populations seek a more central place in the dominant society. A critical limitation to their quest is a failure to understand the cultural, educational, and social norms that are fundamental to the greater social world. In this light, I want to address more specifically, that part of our conference theme that I have interpreted as elements of change, which addresses these issues of the political, social, and information effects on a small world.

At some point all of us live in a small world. Small world lives are not insignificant. They can tell us a great deal about ways in which cultural and social spaces held opportunities and challenges. What I have often referred to as small world lives is that which is played out on a small stage and where most useful information comes from small places. For marginal people this means that the information borders on common concerns, which is often routine in nature.

In this vein, I want to share with you a series of studies that I have conducted that speak to these dimensions. Let me begin with a general philosophy that underlies my research and to highlight some themes of that philosophy that has some bearing on our conference.
General Philosophy

Most of the occurrences in this world are the result of information that holds it together. In this sense, when information does come in it is viewed as appropriate and normal. On the other hand, most of the information produced outside the small world of marginal people has little lasting value to the reality of their lives.

We all know that the information needs of all of us have increased rapidly due to a number of cultural, political, and technological changes. For example in a recent article titled “The Future of Academic Libraries and Changing User Needs: General Concepts and Concrete Developments” (1999), Van Bentum and Braaksma note that at the University Library in the Netherlands “estimating user needs deserves more attention than it often gets. Too often statements on user needs are based on suppositions of providers of information services instead of on empirical information. Much more observation, monitoring and research is needed regarding the behaviour and needs of users of information (p.3).”

As argued by our authors all of us seek information to manage our personal and professional lives. However, researchers, librarians, and information professionals know very little as to what it is that motivates any of us to start that search process.

The information needs of “ordinary people” have also increased dramatically in response to the changing needs of a technologically sophisticated society and its demands for all its citizens to be informed. One problem with current research is that the existing studies tend not to be focused on those we might call the “marginalized people” who live small world lives on the fringes of our formal information systems. For the most part
these are persons we have typically typed as “non-users,” meaning of course that since they are not users of libraries we have little to offer them. In addition, until very recently, our library and professional providers of information have mainly ignored them. In many respects, we don’t know what their social and information worlds are, and thus have little understanding of how they meet their information needs through advice or assistance that could help them cope with everyday reality.

I am hopeful however that there are signs in both Europe and the United States that we are becoming more sensitive to the needs of these people. For example, I recently came across an article that addresses the Association partnership of the Swedish Library with Libraries in South Africa. This particular article began with a quote from a South African Librarian that states, “we are not calling upon you to do things for us, but we are calling upon you to share your knowledge and expertise” In my own country, there are signs that persons who have traditionally been overlooked in this information age are having their voices heard by practitioners and scholars. Unfortunately, though a positive beginning, the overall effect seems all too small. In addition, I think some of the blame must lie with our own philosophy and comfort zone. Too many of us know and understand the elite learners. Because they are “our kind of people.” We speak the same language, have a similar view of the world, and can appreciate the appropriate role that libraries play within our information worlds. Therefore, by design or intent, what we have concentrated on is a relatively elite group of people who by education or experience have become the habitual users of our technological and formal systems of information.
By focusing research on those users, who know how to interact with our systems, a large number of people (including those I study, namely the poor) have been somewhat neglected through this rapid era of change.

In this age of change and development, many computerized and political systems have been developed to serve the needs of the poor, in an effort to make our societies more information rich, yet the poor remain outsiders. Why? What is it about the cultural and information world of the poor that keeps them from feasting at the table laden with information abundance?

**Information Access and Information Avoidance**

One way to address this extremely complicated social phenomenon is to look at the issues of *information access and information avoidance*. I want to examine this complex relationship in terms of what Robert Merton has labeled as “insiders/outsiders” access to knowledge and in relation to my opening discussion regarding change and the role of libraries.

For the sake of this paper, however, my primary focus will not be a critical examination of the types of information created by outsiders. What is of more interest is how this information enters the small worlds of people lives. Another curious phenomenon is how, if ever, that same information is viewed as having potentially relevance in meeting the needs of people on the fringes of our information society.

Having asked this, what are some factors that can help in addressing these issues? For starters, we need to acknowledge that differences between information access and avoidance, and more significantly what effect these differences have on what
Kling terms “the libraries of [our] future are not out there waiting to be discovered. They will develop as they are envisioned and developed by librarians and others. These visions and developments are likely to be local, incremental and opportunistic rather than a brilliant grand plan... (2000,p.10).”

In light of Kling’s comments, then what can be said about the difference between access and use, and what can the differences tell us generally about information need? In this great speed of changing skill, vision, and role of libraries, what can be advanced regarding information need and use among the poor? More importantly, does this notion of change allow for both information users as insider and the acceptance of information from the great world outside?

As I indicated earlier, a sensible way to address this extremely complicated question is to look at the issues of information access and information avoidance. The best place to examine this phenomenon is in terms of what Robert Merton has labeled an “insider/outsiders” access to knowledge. In the sociology of knowledge literature an “insider” lives within a small worldview, primarily made up of family and kin. Within these narrow boundaries, sources of information are those which are most accessible, familiar, and carry some weight of trustworthiness. Moreover, information is accepted more easily because both receivers and providers of information understand the relevance of that information in response to this situation or this concern.

Let me provide a brief illustration. DeAngelo gives a vivid portrait of small world life by marginal people called the Pit Indians. In his monograph, Indians in Overalls, he examined the Pit Indians in Maca, California. The author chose to study this particular tribe because he believed that they were the most primitive of the tribes still
existing in California. Because he saw them as choosing to live in the Stone Age in the 20th Century, for the sake of our discussion, it not unreasonable to assume that this could also be viewed as a study of the relationship between small worldness and marganity.

On the other hand, the Pit Indians wondered why the white men all seemed to be homeless, wandering from place to place with little regard for Mother Earth. As the white anthropologist was trying to understand their world, the Indians were also trying to understand white men in light of their understanding of what a people means. That is, for the Pit River Indians the critical question was how do white people define themselves as a people?

DeAngelo had a key informant whom he called “Will Bill.” Actually, he called all the Indians “wild.” For example, there was Wild Tom, Wild Joe, and so on. When the author asked Wild Bill the name of his tribe, Wild Bill responded that the word is people and people is. This, he strongly emphasized, was a word that applied only to Pit River Indians, not to whites. To show this point, I’ll provide a brief exchange between DeAngelo and Wild Bill:

DeAngelo: “People? Are you people?”

Wild Bill: “Ain’t we people?”

DeAngelo: “So are the whites.”

Wild Bill: “Like hell you are. We call you tramps, nothing but tramps. You don’t believe nothing is alive. You are dead yourselves. We don’t call that people.”

What we have in this exchange is a small world in which the term “people” is defined from two perspectives. Both participants view themselves as being people but from totally different worldviews. As this example illustrates, it is difficult to understand
another’s world without an appreciation of the norms that govern that world. The conclusion that DeAngelo draws is that he would never be able to understand the world of the Pit Indians. A reason provided for this realization is that he could not grasp the Indians meaning of things. In the instance, I just provided we have a clear sense of how barriers based on different perceptions can cause information avoidance.

It might also explain why there are such insurmountable barriers between the world of the insider (marginal people) and outsiders (library professionals) about the issue of change. Put in a more humorous vein, Gertrude Stein, in *Reflections on the Atomic Bomb* indicated that “everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense.” Perhaps what the poor people are reluctant to lose is their reliance on what Geertz has called common sense as a social system.

Significantly, what this means in light of information acquisition and use is that insiders shield themselves from needed resources often held by members outside their cultural and social boundaries. This observation is particularly startling since insiders often believe that the information that can be provided by outsiders has the potential to help them.

**Access to information**

Taking this idea of outsiders one step further, if we were to view ourselves as “outsiders” or at least in the sense that we exist within a rich knowledge world, where are the meeting places between ourselves and margined people? One doctoral student of mine, Ms. Renee Franklin, might provide us with an answer. She found that a possible place of interaction between the world of insider/outsider is in “third world places.” This term she borrowed from Ray Oldenburg (1997), who describes third world places, as
public spaces that are neither home nor work. They are frequented because they provide opportunities to enjoy the company of others without formal norms or rules.

As her research indicates, it appears that third world places such as the neighborhood bar, the coffee shop, the beer garden; the local library, beauty and barbershops do lend themselves to casual exchanges of information. It seems to me that in our sensitivity to changing information environments, these might be excellent places to examine the flow and exchange of information among everyday folks. Of course, this has minimal effect on what we are currently terming changes in light of the many pressures facing us as information providers. But I can assure you, providing opportunities through our libraries and services to increase the knowledge and awareness about social reality on the lives of people who are rarely viewed as consumers of our services will have enormous social and professional value.

Nobel laureate Herbert Simon said “to know means to have in one’s memory access to the information process.” In the discussion raised in this paper, thus far, to know can be described as consisting of two kinds of information. The first is first-level knowledge. This simply means that we know the information ourselves from our own experiences or we know where we can get it. Although useful in everyday occurrences, this type of information might not be very helpful when unusual circumstances arise. At this point, what is most needed is information containing second-level knowledge. This is the information that an information society has created for us about sources, people, and phenomena. In second-level knowledge, one is not relying on one’s own experimental knowledge of things. This larger knowledge aboutness is the knowledge world in which we are all potentially outsiders. Let’s leave aside for the moment my observation about
marginalized populations with regard to the new changes occurring in our information environments. Let us apply this same reality to elite users. Synder and Rosenbaum, in their article “How public is the Web? Robots, access, and scholarly communication,” remarked “increasingly large amounts of scholarly output are being made publicly available on the World Wide Web. However, at the same time that information is becoming more accessible, technical developments occurring at universities and colleges are making it potentially more difficult for scholars and others to access information posted on servers in these institutions (1997,p.1).”

As I understand their argument, the authors are lamenting that having grasped how the larger information world works does not necessarily lead to gaining access to that world. Therefore, when we talk of access to information, we are really speaking of a particular kind of information.

What this statement implies and what I believe drives our professional mission is the sense that everyone has a right to the public knowledge that is defining and changing our cultural and political lives. However, as noted by Brenda Dervin, researchers have made very little progress in studying this problem because they have failed to account for several significant phenomena identified in the observation of human information seeking behaviors.

**Meaning in Everyday Life**

It is this idea of meaning or how people use information to reshape, redefine, or reclaim their social reality, played against the background of insider/outsider that is a central concern of this theme. Another basic theme that needs further exploration is the premises that states that that which is important to know are those things viewed as most
relevant. Relevance in this case, is situational. If we look at the views of people who
draw conclusions different from our own by the mere living of their lives, or who learn
different lessons in the school of hard knocks, we will quickly become aware that
commonsense knowledge is both a problematic and a profound affair. In some instances,
adherence to this philosophy carries with it the notion that privileged information from
outsiders sometimes comes into the world of small life though great risk and enormous
personal cost.

More specifically, life within a small world can be restricted by the common view
of everyday knowledge. This general perspective is crystallized by what other insiders
deem to be important news or items seemed at best, trivial. “Insiders’/Outsiders”
connotes a classification of persons. Because members of a social world can be seen in
these terms, it does raise issues of stratification. For example, when a person is typecast,
what it means in terms of information research is that information can be shared or
withheld based on how a person is classified. Such examples as “crowd pleasers”,
“immigrant”, “techie”, even “librarian” come to mind.

Let me give a sense of this from my research on the aging women. In this
inquiry, I discovered two labels that influenced information sharing namely fallen
women and poor dears. Both types were in need of information. However, their ability
to acquire information was determined by other’s perception of them. The fallen women
were seen as residents who were “shameless” in their hunt for male partners. Their
shocking audacity in securing the sexual companionship of the few available males in
residence was a source of daily gossip. When these women asked for advice or help,
more often than not it was denied.
The “poor dears” were also active seekers of males as sexual partners. However, their plight was voiced in sympathetic tones. The other residents saw them as victims. For instance, their need for male comfort was not due to uncontrollable sexual desires, but rather to a sense of wanting to belong again in a male-female relationship. Moreover, their overall life situation was generally discussed in terms of victimization. Consequently, when the “poor dears” sought information, it was generously provided.

This discussion bring me to the fundamental purpose of this presentation, that is, an examination of the concept, change within the contextual descriptions of everyday life. To this I would add the enormous task of exploring this concept within the world of margined people, who by definition have been typecast. What is especially peculiar about this situation is how the definition of self is provided by the definition of outsiders.

Information Avoidance in the Time of Change

Secrecy is a strategy employed in order to guard oneself against unwanted exposure. I found that the older women were engaging in deliberate attempts not to inform others about the true nature of their information need. In fact, the women did not hesitate to conceal physical or mental failings. Another deterrent was linked to the cultural climate of this retirement housing. Residents who were constantly asking for assistance from other residents were often avoided or talked about as being helpless. Even when the women lived a seemingly insider’s life and thus had claim to insider’s information, they were relegated to the world of outsider, both in terms of the frequency of the information requested and the kind of information asked.

Deception
Another way in which positive change that might be used to enlarge an information world, but is avoided, is deception. In the worlds that I research, deception conveys a slightly different meaning than secrecy. As indicated earlier, secrecy is an active process of shutting down or closing off information. Deception, on the other hand, is a deliberate attempt to act out a false social reality. In deception, one never had the slightest intention of telling a true story. Relieved of the truth, one engages in activities in which one’s personal existence is consciously and forcefully distorted. The real trouble with deception is that, because one shares information that is meaningless, information received is mostly irrelevant.

During this time of need why would one deliberately deceive? One reason not unexpectedly is to appear to be better well off than one really is. The need to appear to be successfully coping, or at the very least, to be coping as well as everyone else, seems to be derived from social norms. That is, no one wants to be viewed as less capable than one’s neighbors or friends at solving problematrical situations.

In most cases, a positive or negative reaction to others can be attributed to normative behavior. The essential idea behind this theory is that it gives persons a standard by which to measure one’s own success or failures in coping with information needs. Normative behavior emerges in a small world when the boundaries of that world are narrow. That is, there is less opportunity for a person to engage in individualistic behavior. The lived association that one has with others is an important part in the process of organizing behaviors to fit common interests. If one lived within a marginalized world, we can assume that normative behavior would provide a collective understanding that, at least, in this world one is understood and appreciated.
Information Need, Change, and Libraries

As I wrote in a recent article with Victoria Pendleton, many of the pockets of populations that surround a public library can be viewed as small world. Although often unknown to us, these tiny communities exhibit many dimensions that hold their world together. For example, cultural norms, common language, sense of location in the larger social order, perspective about the value of their world and to some, the valueless impact on the world at large.

We need to examine these issues in light of the concept, change as they pertain to ways in which we view public knowledge, libraries, and information in society. I commend to your attention that these are not traditional areas of research in our field. Discussions regarding them, however, will give exceptional insight into characteristics about a worldview that underlies studies of information.

What Victoria and I discovered was that many members of a social world do not feel compelled to engage in information-seeking strategies. Yet, they can still exhibit information behaviors. For example, they can assume a passive posture in which they receive information, chose not to act on it, or to use it to add to their general stock of commonsense knowledge. Others may be active information-gathers. For them, the world is a large reservoir of facts and events that help to shape their information world.

To recapitulate the major points of my presentation, the role of libraries in a changing knowledge-based world, libraries have a vital role to play. Findings from my inquiries attest to this. If anything new can be added, it would be simply a closer scrunity at the communities we serve and the people who inhabit them. It was my intention to start us thinking along these lines. To reflect on the relationship between our libraries
and where the common person resides in “the information landscape we call the Knowledge Society” (Pendleton and Chatman). As a profession, we have a marvelous opportunity to engage ordinary people to make sense from their daily reality. Our world is overflowing with the types and kinds of information that can enrich their lives. I am optimistic that information will enter their worlds because of your dedication, interest, and concern. These are the things that have been part of our own professional definition, and because they are, we will create the type of change that will make for positive changes on this small landscape we call our world. Said even better than I, Louise Limberg observes that “the objective approach is to improve information transfer, specifically by producing models of users’ knowledge that are compatible with the conceptual frameworks used in information systems (2000, p.52).” I believe that once we can better understand information transfer as change, and the effect of that change on an information world, we will have the necessary “stuff” to create those information systems that she addressed.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


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